

LONDON DAILY TELEGRAPH

6 APRIL 1981

STAT

The Intelligence War

'TERROR NETWORKS'

IN AMERICA

By ROBERT MOSS

THE attempt on President Reagan's life has focused attention on the vulnerability of the United States to terrorist attacks — a vulnerability greatly increased by the erosion of law-enforcement agencies in recent years, and in particular by legal inhibitions imposed on the FBI.

An index of the problem is that the FBI recently closed down its Terrorism Research Centre, responsible for collating leads on international terrorist groups.

One American security official comments sardonically, "If I were going to be a professional terrorist, I'd love to do it in the United States."

A factor that makes American security sources particularly worried is the possibility that radical Palestinian organisations have established a network of "sleeper agents" in the United States who may be used in future terrorist attacks.

A number of American citizens — including members of the American Indian Movement (AIM), with which the Palestinian radicals have cultivated especially close relations — are known to have undergone guerrilla training at PLO camps in Lebanon and Syria.

Information that has reached Washington from sources inside the PLO suggests that its "special operations" executive (headed by Abu Walid, who visited Teheran just before the seizure of the American Embassy there) is seeking to build up a network of three-man cells around the United States.

The same sources have disclosed that energy installations are slated as the special target for these cells — an alarmingly soft target, since many fuel depots, for example, are defended by little more than a wire fence.

American security officials concede it is not possible to provide blanket protection against the wide range of possible terrorist attacks from this or other quarters (notably Puerto Rican and other Hispanic revolutionaries).

The key to a viable counter-terrorist strategy is a flow of inside information that makes it possible to pre-empt planned operations.

For the moment the crippling restrictions imposed on the ability of the FBI and police intelligence departments to obtain that information is regarded as the single most serious threat to internal security.

Debate on space weapons

THE successful operational test of a Soviet killer satellite last month gave an added sense of urgency to America's efforts to develop space-based weapons systems.

The CIA has monitored 18 Soviet tests of killer satellites since October 1980. In the latest test, a small hunter satellite, weighing some three tons, homed in on its target and blew itself up, destroying the target satellite's communications and guidance systems.

This relatively old-fashioned type of space weapon worries Pentagon observers less than the high-energy lasers and particle beam weapons that the Russians have been developing at secret scientific establishments like Saryshagan in Kazakhstan.

While the Russians are generally believed to be considerably behind the Americans in space vehicles' technology, they have made notable breakthroughs in the development of directed-energy weapons that could be used both for the destruction of American communications and early-warning satellites and the potentially decisive factor for anti-missile defence.

AVIATION WEEK recently reported a major breakthrough in this field at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. In a test at an underground site in Nevada, American scientists successfully demonstrated the practicability of a high-energy laser weapon pumped by X-rays from a small nuclear detonation.

Some United States experts see weapons of this type as a potentially devastating answer to a Soviet missile attack.

It has even been suggested in one Pentagon report that 25-30 space battle stations armed with high-energy lasers could provide near-total defence against an attack by Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) over a 30-minute period, burning up the booster rockets in the boost phase.

However, some specialists are still reluctant to accept that space weapons could be the key to victory in a future world conflict. A recent study by a team of experts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) suggested that a space-based laser weapons system would be enormously costly with uncertain military advantages.

More revealing the MIT study also says that successful development of such a system could trigger a Soviet nuclear attack.

It says there would be a strong temptation for the Russians to attack it "while it is vulnerable during the embryonic stages of its deployment" — which sounds like a round-about way of saying that the Russians, at least, believe it would work.

Castro lobby

in U.S.

THE George Washington University in the American capital was the venue, a week ago, for the "First National Organising Conference to End the Blockade against Cuba."

The gathering attracted a number of leading American

liberals and radicals, including Mr. Ramsey Clark and Congressman George Crockett of Detroit.

What fascinated Cuba-watchers who monitored the conference — which was intended to mobilise support for the normalisation of relations between Washington and Havana, despite the evidence of the Castro regime's direct involvement in insurgencies throughout Central America — was the direct involvement of identified Cuban-intelligence officers.

The meeting was attended by members of the Cuban Mission to the United Nations and of the Cuban Interests Section at the Czech Embassy in Washington.

But more revealing is the fact that one of the prime orchestrators of the meeting was Senor Jesus Jimenez Escobar, head of the Cubatur travel agency in Havana.

Senor Jimenez Escobar is identified by Western intelligence sources as a senior officer in the Direccion General de Inteligencia (DGI), Castro's secret service.

He was declared persona non grata and expelled from New York after the FBI found evidence that he had been involved in the supply of explosives to an underground terrorist group.

As head of Cubatur, Senor Jimenez Escobar is ideally placed to provide couriers for the DGI through the worldwide network of travel agents with whom he deals.

Salvador's Communists

LAST week's column contained an exclusive account of a secret report by Senor Farid Handal, brother of the Salvadoran Communist leader, Senor Shafik Handal, on a trip he made to the United States last year to organise a "solidarity" network for the revolutionaries in El Salvador.

According to senior Western analysts, Senor Shafik Handal has long been playing a role in Soviet strategy in Latin America that extends far beyond El Salvador.

These sources report that Senor Shafik Handal originally gained control of the Salvadoran Communist party at the end of 1968 through an operation mounted by the International Department (ID) of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist party.

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